Abs-218

Caroline Tagg and Oliver Mason (University of Birmingham)

Orthographic creativity in Twitter: tweeting about the World Cup 2010

This paper looks at the extent to which corpus methods can be used to explore Internet interactions on the social network site (SNS), Twitter.

Twitter users post messages or 'Tweets' which are restricted to 140 characters and which form a noisy and disjointed online space. It is also fast-paced, with 95 million Tweets posted each day (according to information on the Twitter website). Users have responded to this seemingly incoherent discourse through their appropriation of various online facilities, whereby a Tweeter's posts can be commented on by their 'followers', and links to external websites can be posted and discussed. Although much has now been written on the use of '@' to address a particular interlocutor, the hash key '#' to indicate topic and 'RT' to show that a message has been forwarded or 'Retweeted' (e.g. Honeycutt and Herring 2009), little has yet been documented on how language is used to indicate stance or how Tweeters mark their engagement with each other linguistically. Assuming that communicative constraints such as those which characterise Twitter often encourage creativity in the fulfilling of interpersonal and evaluative functions, we would expect to see creative, playful language use in Twitter.

In this presentation, we report on an initial study into orthographic creativity, that is, the respelling of words, often to capture spoken pronunciation such as with <wanna> or to create eye-catching forms such as <ur> for 'your' (c.f. Sebba, 2007). The study draws on a corpus of 1902 Tweets collected in July 2010 on the subject of the World Cup. Respellings are identified and grouped together using a list of wordforms ordered by frequency, and are then explored using concordances. It emerges that respelling in Twitter does not serve to abbreviate or shorten a posting, as might be expected due to the similar constraints and functions of SMS text messaging where such practices have been observed (Tagg, 2009). Instead, respellings often lengthen words (as in <ghanaaaa>) and reflect local pronunciations (such as <dis> for 'this'), and thus appear to contribute to personal expression and the formation of community on Twitter.

Whilst giving insights into the discourse of Twitter, this study raises questions regarding the extent to which Tweets sent via Twitter can be regarded as forming a coherent discourse; how linguists can find a way into the vast, rapidly changing 'Twittersphere'; and the role which corpus methods can play in this.

References

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